

OBITUARY

MARK ABRAMS

27 April 1906 – 25 September 1994

Mark Abrams founded Research Services Ltd (RSL) in 1946, capitalising on his advertising agency experiences in the 1930s and his subsequent experiences, and that of his staff, in the various wartime Ministries, to become a founding father of social and market research in Britain.

Mark had trained as a sociologist at the London School of Economics in the late 1920s, where he studied under R W Tawny. After receiving his doctorate he spent some time at US universities, before returning to London to join Britain's leading advertising agency, the London Press Agency. At the LPA he conducted surveys for many consumer oriented companies, such as Cadbury's. However, such work simply provided him with the facilities to explore his true interests of the mass media, social trends and social policy.

In 1934 he conducted one of the first studies of newspapers and magazines. The sample size was in excess of 20,000 people. It established him as a figure in mass communications, and he was a dominant person in that area for many years (when I asked him many years later 'why a sample of 20,000?', he told me that when, as a raw young executive, he was first given the project, his MD asked him to recommend a sample size. In wild ignorance he suggested first 200, then 2,000 and then seeing that these suggestions were not favourably received said, 'we really need 20,000 adults': big smiles all round and in this scientific manner the scope of future National Readership Surveys was set!).

In 1939 the LPA was planning to convert its research unit into a research company with Mark as Managing Director, but the war interfered with those intentions. However, the unit quickly found a role, conducting surveys for the Ministry of Food concerning rationing and nutrition; looking at the impact of German bombing on the morale of the civilian population; and many other surveys directed towards the war effort.

From the earliest days RSL combined public sector and political work with the more commercial activities of media, advertising and product usage and attitude research. RSL's 1946-47 archives chart the progress of post-war Britain from shortages and rationing to the modern consumer behaviour.

Under Mark's leadership RSL pioneered British market research theory and practice: two companies RSL (ex LPA – subsequently Leo Burnett Ltd) and BMRB (ex J Walter Thompson) became the 'Oxbridge' of market research, the alumni of which dominated the business for the next 30 years. Mark had always maintained staff of RSL received a unique training through leading figures such as Paul Lazarfeld or Seymour Lipset being co-opted by Mark to give seminars when they were in London.

To those of us who worked for him he was demanding, sometimes terrifying and always infinitely kind. Our absolute dedication to the task was taken for granted; he did us the courtesy of believing that we could become almost as erudite and creative as he himself was.

My own memories as a young executive include being tremendously inspired by his enthusiasm about the importance of our task: counting and re-counting election forecast questionnaires through the night in the pre-computer days of 1966 was deemed as a privilege.

While he rarely articulated moral imperatives, the climate in which we worked was of the absolute virtue, in which the only reward was in the educated and eternal quest for truth. 'Client Service' was interpreted as doing what was best, rather than what was desired. At the same time he was always practical and sometimes cynical about the uses and abuses of research findings.

He was uninterested in money, and, at least in later years, for such an able statistician, quite unaware of the effects of inflation. Involvement in a social research project with Mark over the last 20 years has inevitably included a telephone call from the Great Man along the lines 'My dear Dawn, you must realise that my client doesn't have that sort of money', followed by incredulity when I tell him what our (scarcely over-rewarded) interviewers are paid.

Mark was interested in research because it mattered: researchers were in possession of a tool which could change society for the better. He was always ready to learn and adopt techniques from other disciplines around the world. When he retired he translated his personal situation into a new challenge, the way in which research could benefit the elderly: his later work was sponsored by Age Concern.

The ethic with which Mark imbued all those who worked with him has continued to dominate the company he founded. Indeed the greatest sadness among younger staff is that he will not be participating in the fiftieth anniversary celebrations planned in 18 months' time.

(with assistance from Donald Monk, Mark's successor as Chief Executive of RSL, and my predecessor).

DAWN MITCHELL